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ABSTRACT

The contribution of sociologists to social action programs has been notable for being unnotable, with a few important exceptions. Yet the future and survival of sociology lies in moving sociology more obviously from the classroom to the world outside. Sociologists suffer from a restricted vision of what their discipline can do, which causes them to be preoccupied with theorizing and allows them to think of problems as potential journal articles. One reason for the failure of sociologists to have an impact on social action is that applied research, the generation of new information helpful in problem solving, as opposed to theoretical research, the testing of new theories, is lacking. Theory is useless without concrete knowledge of a community with which to work. Another reason is that sociologists are not really professionally competent; they are unable to identify concrete manifestations in patterned social interaction. The fault is in the training which relies, for instance, on abstract definitions and descriptive accounts rather than use of the community as a laboratory. The emerging sub-discipline, the sociology of development, is one step, however, toward bringing about more effective sociologists for the good of the entire discipline. (Author/JH)

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AN OVERVIEW OF SOCIOLOGISTS' CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL ACTION SYSTEMS*

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Every once in a while an opportunity comes along for me to get something off my chest. The invitation to participate in this section of the 1974 Meeting of the S.S.A. meetings on the sociologists' contribution to social action systems or what I prefer to term programs of instigated or induced change (planning or development programs, if you wish) provided such an opportunity. My specific assignment, at least as I understood it, was to evaluate in a general way what sociologists have or haven't done in the way of applying their discipline. After more than 30 years in the game I have some rather definite convictions. Before I am challenged on this point, I will admit they stem from my particular socialization experiences. My rebuttal is simply that my experiences are rather broad in that they cover the last 30 years and weave through all sorts of teaching, research and extension experience, plus an active participation in professional, government and private groups.

By way of introduction, I can and will give my overview in two sentences, but my elaboration will take several pages in more normative academic style. First, the contribution of sociologists to social action programs has been notable for being unnotable with a few important exceptions.

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Second, the future and survival of sociology lies in moving sociology more obviously from the classroom to the world outside. So having said, let me get on with the elaboration.

It is possible to set the stage for my remarks by outlining the perspective from which I derive the rather bold conclusions I have just given. This perspective is based on what I will call a participant-observer derived conviction that many sociologists suffer from myopia or, translated, a very limited vision of what their discipline can and should do and of the approach it should take. I am a bit presumptive, perhaps, but I believe I can support these conclusions.

The first evidence I see of the restricted vision of sociologists is their preoccupation with theorizing and philosophizing. What I am saying is that, because little stress is put on the application of sociology, the average sociologist who is invited to work on a social problem tends to move more or less directly from theory and/or social philosophy to prescription. In so doing, he is responding in terms of the training and orientation he has received in graduate school and as a member of an academic department. This training leads him to define certain patterns of behavior as social problems and inherent evils. It does not prepare him very well to cope with the problem however. Consequently, when he is given an assignment to work on a problem, he goes about in Don Quixote fashion jousting with all of those he perceives as responsible for the evil he sees. More often than not, his efforts are rejected as fruitless and he becomes frustrated and disenchanted. He does not understand why his ideas and programs are not accepted. Unfortunately, while theorizing and philosophizing have their merits and can suffice for the classroom, they are not enough when one ventures out into the real world.

The second indicator I have of the limited view of sociologists is manifested in their tendency to think of problems as a happy hunting ground for a paper that will bowl the editors of ASR, AJS, or Social Forces over. This explains why research is aimed and directed not at the local client public system level, but at the professional peer group level. After all, after the grant money and consultant fees are gone, one will have to go back to his department and the lasting effect of field work is measured there in terms of a publication list. What matter if the given action program works or the given social system improved.

The above observations may be a bit of an exaggeration, but they make my point. This point is that we cannot continue to talk to ourselves and to train exclusively for the classroom forever and ever. Client publics from the outside are waiting and asking for help - help the sociologist can deliver. However, these publics are not served by classroom oratory or by papers in professional journals or even by workshop conferences which are simply arenas where professionals talk to one another. They want something much more pragmatic, something that can be measured in terms of the improvement of the quality of their lives. Within recent years, sociologists have had golden opportunity after golden opportunity to make valuable contributions to every major social problem or issue which has faced our nation. Run through the list - minority problems, poverty and disadvantage problems, crime and delinquency problems, and lately environmental, conservation and ecology problems. Now, try to calculate how much difference it made having sociologists around. I have tried to do this in several instances when I have served on evaluation teams

charged with appraising the worth of programs in which sociologists had major input. Despite my deepest bias toward sociology I was more often than not forced to the conclusion that the programs were pitiful failures. I have asked myself and others, "Why?", many times, and I believe I have at least a tentative answer, one with two parts. It goes something like this.

The first part of my answer is that sociologists skip a step in moving from philosophy and/or theory to action program. This is a step which must be comprehended and taken if success as a community developer is to be achieved. It is no less nor no more than applied research. In contrast to theoretical research, which focuses mainly on hypothesis testing and development of methdology, applied research focuses on the generation of information helpful in a problem solving sense.

The question arises as to why most sociologists, with some of those in government agencies such as the Cooperative Extension Service, and Agricultural Experiment Stations an exception, do not turn to applied research even when working in an action-oriented setting. The answer, in a brutally frank response, is that they are hung-up on a myth which is faithfully perpetuated in almost all professional milieus. This is that it is somehow stigmatizing to admit the utility of or engage in such endeavors. One must be concerned with the development of new theory and more sophisticated method, and can never, never admit the use of proven approaches, even to obtain information basic to problem solving. Again let me illustrate.

Good action programs cannot be planned without background data on the target populations of a descriptive nature. To obtain such information, one usually must do a simple survey designed to provide demographic, economic and cultural (i.e. attitude) profiles of a population. I ask, what academic sociologist will do this type of work without a profound feeling that he will be negatively sanctioned by his professional peers.

In bringing this part of my discussion to a close, it is appropos to point out that simple methodological procedures are as much in disfavor in some sociological circles as tested theory. Descriptive statistics, and unsophisticated tests for cause and association no matter how appropriate to the problem or useful to the client must never suffice. Measurement must be pushed to the ridiculous, judging in terms of the soundness of the data being measured. Let me hasten to add that I have no quarrel with sophisticated measurement where this is appropriate - only with obvious computer overkill. Here, I am no doubt again indulging in a bit of preachment.

Now to my second conviction as to why sociologists have contributed so little to the implementation of social action. This conclusion is, if possible, a more profound indictment than that of being hung-up on a status thing related to what brings professional accolades. It is that many who identify themselves as sociologists are not really professionally competent at all. I know that I am bordering on heresy, but I must speak my mind, hopefully in the interest of constructive thought. What I have reference to is the fact that action programs, by their nature, are schemes to alter existing social structures and their inherent processes.

To plan action program strategies one must comprehend the nature of the structure of social systems and how they are articulated. This is a far-cry, again, from a glib, humorously illustrated hour lecture on the family customs of other societies or on the life-styles of different social classes. It is also more than being able to give rather good, but abstract definitions of structural elements such as norms, roles, status-positions and of master processes, such as socialization, communication, social control, and social change. To work at the action program level, one must be able to operationalize structural and processual concepts, which is to say one must be able to readily identify their concrete manifestations in patterned social interaction. This calls for a clear conceptual notion of the fabric and dynamics of social systems plus in-depth study of particular systems. After all, how well could an architect plan for an addition to a building, if he did not understand the original structure and purpose of the building. Many, many programs planned in good faith have bombed out because the planners failed to understand that models from their own countries and cultures could not be transplanted unaltered in host countries or cultures.

The inability of sociologists to think concretely in terms of the unique aspects of the structure and processes of systems such as communities can, again, be traced to the training programs found in most graduate departments. Stress is almost never placed on the study of real-world social units, but on descriptive accounts, which are often speculative in nature. My plea is that we turn serious attention to teaching how social order is manifested by more use of communities as laboratories. In a community, the challenge to explain the behavior

characteristics of small groups and larger units of social organization is a great deal more in the way of a learning experience than an artificial exercise. After all, medical students use actual bodies in their practice laboratories. This way and only this way will students comprehend the profound nature of social structures and their accompanying problems and understand how they might go about inducing change designed to increase the organizational strengths of social units.

Now for a concluding statement. I stated in the beginning that it was my conviction that the future of sociology lay in the world of pragmatics. I am happy to note that, despite many non-believers, there are others who seem to share this view. The clearest indication of this fact is the appearance of a relatively new and promising sub-discipline identified as the sociology of development. This emerging sub-discipline makes no apology for the fact that it is expressly concerned with the application of sociology in efforts to instigate change. Already we have a considerable number of sociologists who openly claim that they are working on community development programs, on rural development programs, on international development programs, and on other types of development programs. These sociologists are busy changing the image I have just outlined. Up to now, most of the sociologists working on development programs have a rural sociology experience and background - simply because rural sociologists have been trained to cope with problems in an applied setting. But others are joining the crowd, and I, for one, am glad. Let me repeat. If sociology does not look in the direction of social action programs I cannot see too much of a future for our discipline. We must leave the security of the classroom and face up to our promise and challenge - otherwise we will slowly but surely fade away.